

# Building the Naval Innovation Network

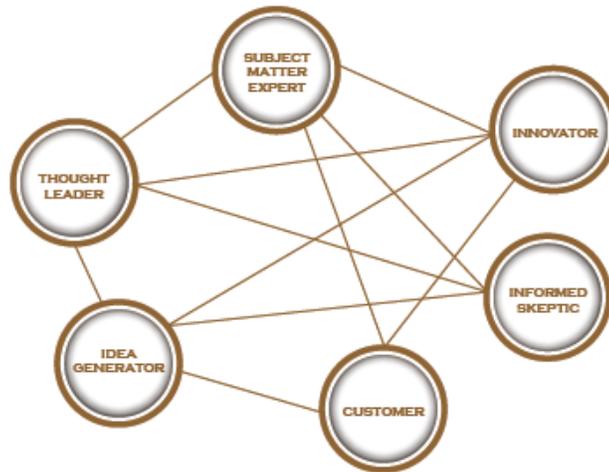
By Ms. Jane Roberts \*\*

## INTRODUCTION

The Naval Innovation Network is a Department of the Navy-wide forum to connect innovators, thought leaders, subject matter experts, mid-level managers and senior leaders to champion, accelerate and promote innovation. Collectively, the group represents a wide range of disciplines, organizations and functional communities around the globe. Through greater collaboration, creativity, experimentation, “intra” preneurship, and diversity of thought, the Naval Innovation Network seeks to actively engage the tremendous untapped intellectual capacity and motivation of our talented workforce to tackling our most complex problems and improving our mission.

## VISION

Tactically and practically, the Naval Innovation Network fosters greater social connections between organizations, people, and the innovation community of practice. It will do so by building virtual platforms as well as physical forums, where individuals and teams can share ideas and problems and let the network help. As the Network expands, people will be able to collaborate with others on ideas, brainstorm viable solutions to important problems, try out new technologies and experiment in creative spaces on a much larger scope and scale than ever before. To create an agile and resilient 21st century workforce ready for an increasingly challenging and uncertain future, the Network seeks to complete four major tasks over the next 2 years: crowdsource the DON, incentivize innovation, support innovators locally, and create an environment that institutionalizes innovation.



*The Innovation Network connects across organizational and functional stovepipes.*

## CROWDSOURCE THE DON

With a workforce of 900,000 Marines, Sailors and civilians in the Department, we have a tremendous opportunity to unleash and unlock the creative talent and energy of a diverse, multi-

generational workforce to solve our most difficult challenges. In order to tap into this potential more fully, a DON-level virtual platform called “the Hatch” recently stood up, allowing military and civilians anywhere around the world, on ship and ashore, to leverage their knowledge and skills to build on ideas and solve problems. The Hatch has the ability for individuals, organizations and communities to develop their own “campaigns” to solve vexing problems or get new ideas on untapped areas. Some examples of past and current public campaigns are: Artificial Intelligence/Robotics, Virtual and Simulated Environments, Open Ideas Forum, Incentives, New Issues 2015 for Reducing Administrative Distractions, and Navy Reserve Policy. There have also been several private campaigns to focus on specific topics for a particular ship or community. Getting feedback from large crowds through crowdsourcing is a relatively fast and easy way to get to the best or most interesting ideas on a wide range of topics. By dramatically increasing the visibility and scalability of concept discussions and proposals, many more people (100x, 1000x, 100,000x) can vote and provide comments to improve an idea. There is tremendous potential in crowdsourcing the DON whether through “the Hatch” sponsored at the Department level, through “Navy Brightwork” to support deckplate innovation sponsored by Naval Warfare Development Command, or through other creative ideation venues available to the Department.

## **INCENTIVIZE INNOVATION**

Innovation is not only about creative ideas; it’s also doing new things and realizing the benefits from their implementation. The Department is currently developing ways to incentivize even more innovation through annual awards, revamping the current MILCAP/BENESUGS program, and incorporating non-traditional ways to reward and recognize innovators. First, an ALNAV has just been released to announce the SECNAV’s annual Innovation Awards program for 2015. Nomination forms are currently being accepted from now through 31 October for significant innovative achievements in eight distinct categories. Second, work has started on revamping the current MILCAP/BENESUGS program, including ways to eliminate extraneous administrative layers and accelerate the monetary award process for mature ideas. Third, a group of folks are looking at non-traditional ways to reward and recognize innovators especially designed to appeal to Generation Y and Millennials. Some of the non-monetary awards being considered include: public recognition, training opportunities and education on innovation, additional time and space to develop ideas further, unique access to leaders and subject matter experts to discuss and refine their ideas, and special-access events for innovators. These are just a few of many ideas being discussed.



## **SUPPORT INNOVATORS LOCALLY**

Innovation is robust at the grass-roots level and grows as individuals find other open and creative minds to stimulate a dynamic force for change. The Navy’s Athena Project is a prime

example of motivated, locally driven innovation which has proven so successful that it has naturally caught on in other places. The idea of “Shark Tank”-like 5-minute pitches to “angel investors” allows participants to generate out-of-the-box possibilities in a fun, friendly, yet competitive atmosphere. The concept of design thinking and accelerator classes to teach a variety of methods for tapping into different ways of problem solving is catching hold in many communities including the Intel community, the CNO’s Rapid Innovation Cell (CRIC), and Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Lab (APL). A more formal and deliberate approach to supporting local innovation is the growing trend of identifying and assigning specific points of contact, such as science advisors or lead engineers, to be “Innovation Officers” at local commands. Recently, one Echelon 2 organization stood up a new innovation cell with points of contact at its Echelon 3 commands to bring new ideas forward from that community. A more 21st century technological tool to supporting innovators locally is the concept of the Fab Lab. The Fab Lab is much like a hobby shop for 3-D printing which allows people to design and produce their own 3-D models of objects. Experimentation and prototyping is an important tactic for innovation because it effectively tests a design and incorporates faster, iterative changes to deliver a completed product. If the product needs to be manufactured using different materials, 3-D modeling results in higher quality requirements specifications for a design. As more Fab Labs become available around the country, whether through partnering with local community colleges, military community services, or on ships and in fleet concentration areas, this will be yet another way to support innovators locally. Office of Naval Research also hosts a web-based tool to bring technology needs to the Naval Research Enterprise for rapid response and delivery through a science and technology program called TechSolutions.

## **CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT THAT INSTITUTIONALIZES INNOVATION**

Last, and most importantly, proactive and responsive leadership actions at all levels is absolutely essential to supporting and reinforcing a culture of innovation within your span of influence. Whether you personally consider yourself an innovator or not, you play a vital role in influencing innovation and helping it to develop and grow. While there is definitely a time and



place for being effective and efficient, there are also times and places where championing a good idea, giving people time to think, experiment, and test out a new approach, and educating others on how to navigate through a process can yield far greater learning and overall improvement to the larger Naval mission and long-term vision. As the world becomes more complicated and interconnected, success will not always easily be determined by just one person’s idea or action, but by the adjacent and collective learning of one person’s idea building off of another’s, and so on. We will always have brilliant inventors tinkering in a room by themselves, but we also need leaders and organizations to: encourage diversity of thought, cultivate intrinsic motivation, emphasize information sharing, comfort with risk and uncertainty, agile decision-making, and

measuring what matters. The Naval Innovation Network wants to extend that reach by helping leaders at all points to increase the prevalence of these six organizational features of innovative organizations to help the DON overcome unnecessary bureaucratic barriers and introduce new concepts and more effective ways of thinking and acting which can truly change the game for our future.

## **CONCLUSION**

As we enter into the autumn, members of the Naval Innovation Network will be hosting local events and virtual forums and visiting major fleet concentration areas to get the word out and offer additional opportunities for getting involved. We invite you to be a part of our innovation future.

For more information about the Naval Innovation Network, participate in the Hatch, or to find people in your community of interest or local geographical area, contact:  
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\*\* = The opinions expressed here are solely those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of the Navy, Department of Defense or the United States government.